Remembering the Dead: Civil War Mourning

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By the time the Civil War began in 1861, North Carolinians observed the deaths of loved ones in a variety of ways. Called *mourning*, these traditions and rituals developed over several decades. People emphasized objects to symbolize a death. Special jewelry, artwork, and clothing became visible methods of showing grief and sadness. One of the most famous individuals to publicly display her mourning process was England's Queen Victoria. After the death of her husband, Prince Albert, in 1859, the queen put on all-black clothes. She never wore colors again, marking a lifelong period of mourning. Victoria set a fashion standard for American women facing staggering numbers of wartime deaths.

Between 1861 and 1865, Tar Heel State families watched over 130,000 men and boys march off to war with mixed feelings of fear and patriotism. Tens of thousands of these husbands, sons, and brothers died on the battlefield and from wounds or disease. North Carolina's wives, mothers, and sisters fell back on mourning traditions for comfort. Because of shortages of fabric and money, simple jewelry (sometimes handmade from the hair of the person who had died) and black clothing became primary ways for women to show grief.

Books, magazines, catalogs, and newspapers all provided rules and clues about how to go about mourning. *Godey's Lady's Book* was a main source of information on fashion, etiquette, and other matters related to family and social life. Most issues of this magazine included examples of appropriate mourning dress or articles explaining how proper ladies in mourning should behave (such as staying away from most social gatherings). Researchers also can study photographs, letters, and diaries of women who recorded their grief and fears. When recounting one soldier's death, Catherine Edmondston, of Halifax County, wrote, "How much more heavy is the pressure of grief when there is nothing to be done but to look the fact [of death] steadily in the face."

Society expected women to wear mourning clothes to display their loss to the world. Full mourning—wearing all black and no other color—was expected to last at least a year. After a year of full mourning, women could add small amounts of color to their wardrobe, such as white collars on dresses. Other colors slowly filtered in. Gray, lavender, and purple were all right for what became known as "second mourning." The task of sewing and putting together an acceptable mourning outfit was difficult. In 1861 Edmonston noted in her diary that, for a week, she had been "in a sad task making up my mourning for my dear Papa & today for the first time put it on. The sight of this black dress brings the cause why I wear it more fully to my mind, if possible brings him more vividly before me, dear old gentleman!"

Second stage mourning dress. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

How you mourned also depended on things like your economic status, gender, and race. For example, when mourning the death of a wife or female relative, men were not required to mourn as long as women; etiquette required them to wear a black armband, a badge, or a rosette of black fabric. Younger widows usually would need to remarry as soon as possible, since it was difficult for single women to support themselves and their children. Therefore, as soon as they had demonstrated proper respect for their dead husbands, they began to wear clothing that was more attractive. Older women stayed in mourning (for husbands, children, and other relatives) longer than younger ones, and some never wore colors again. Wealthier women often kept a full wardrobe of mourning items, including jewelry, bonnets, veils, and gloves.

As the Civil War progressed, North Carolina women had less money and fewer supplies like fabric because of the Union blockade of Southern ports. It became difficult to display proper mourning attire. Many women took dresses they already owned and dyed them black to meet their needs. Letters and diaries recount that some women borrowed mourning attire. Others purchased low-quality fabrics and supplies at inflated prices just to be able to outfit themselves properly.

The large number of men dying presented a range of problems for families back home. In mourning traditions, much emphasis was placed on a proper burial and funeral. At the beginning of the war, funerals became patriotic spectacles for the community and symbols of loss for the family. As the war continued, the reality of death and sadness became all too normal. Wearing black grew to be a statement of a Confederate woman's dedication to the war. With so many men dying in prison camps, hospitals, and on battlefields, it often became difficult to get all the bodies returned to relatives. Numerous diaries and letters describe family members searching battlefields to retrieve the remains of their loved ones for burial at home.

As the war drew to a close, survivors wanted to memorialize the sacrifices of all who participated. Women especially took to the task of remembering the lives and deaths of the state's Confederate soldiers. The development of memorial associations led to the placement of monuments to the dead in towns and cemeteries across the Tar Heel State. The first Civil War monument erected in North Carolina stands in the Cross Creek Cemetery in Fayetteville. A group of local women raised funds and dedicated the monument on December 30, 1868. This monument, and many others that dot the landscape, serve to remind us of past events, full of sacrifice and tragedy. We, too, may remember the dead.

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